



"Safe Children, Strong Families"

OCS Response to the 2022 Alaska Citizen Review Panel Report

Introduction

This year, the Alaska Citizen Review Panel (CRP) focused its oversight and evaluation efforts on a critical issue in the field of child protection, both nationally and in Alaska: recruitment and retention of quality frontline child protective services staff. The job of the child protective services worker is challenging, stressful, and requires many skills. Although these jobs can be highly rewarding, they are not a good fit for everyone. Job market pressures during and in the wake of the pandemic have made recruitment and retention even more difficult across most employment sectors, including child protection, creating historically high levels of turnover at the Office of Children's Services and other agencies. Nationally, the Children's Bureau has made workforce recruitment and retention a priority and OCS has done the same in Alaska. The Alaska Department of Family and Community Services (DFCS), Office of Children's Services (OCS) appreciates both the level of effort and the creative approach that the Panel used to deeply research this topic to include directly engaging workers and OCS management in the process to produce a report that is both substantial and useful to the agency.

OCS Response to 2021-22 CRP Findings, Challenges and Recommendations

The OCS response to the CRP's 2021-22 Annual Report addresses the recommendations identified under each of the Panel's Five-Year Enduring Priorities in the same order they appear in the report. Within each section, the CRP's enduring Priorities appear first, followed by the OCS response. The Enduring Priorities appear as follows:

- 1) Healthy Child Protective Services System
- 2) Reciprocal Engagement
- 3) Public Outreach
- 4) Collaborative Relationship with OCS
- 5) CRP Education and Development

Healthy Child Protective Services System

Recommendations for Retention

- **Evaluate Organizational Culture & Wellness**
- **Review Compensation & Benefits Policies**
- **Enhance Training & Development**
- **Improve Technology, Workflow & Support**

OCS Response

Organizational Culture and Wellness

While significant OCS staff time is directed toward recruitment and retention related projects, and a Work Plan is in place that includes many of the initiatives mentioned in the CRP's report, OCS agrees that additional staff dedicated to working on these issues on an ongoing basis would likely be helpful.

OCS always strives for transparency. The OCS Statewide Executive Team (SET) attends regional all staff meetings, on a rotating basis, providing all frontline staff with a reoccurring opportunity to both hear directly from and speak directly to OCS leadership. The Staff Advisory Board is another platform through which field office staff engage directly with OCS management. Any field office staff can volunteer to participate on this board, whose primary purpose is to provide input from frontline staff to managers for improving programs and policies that effect their work at OCS.

OCS has made diligent efforts to support employees in their self-care and will continue efforts to identify specific actions that might support progress in this area. OCS has provided all workers increased flexibility through more flexible work schedules and the ability to work from home. Most trainings and meetings can now be attended virtually. This provides all workers more opportunity to be at home and/or to avoid unnecessary work-related travel.

Compensation and Benefits

On-call has always been a necessary but challenging aspect of child protection. OCS has improved the structure of on-call services using an answering service that provides initial call screening to ensure staff members are only being asked to respond to true, present danger situations. OCS formed an on-call work group that is evaluating additional opportunities for improvements in on-call. The stand-by pay that workers receive for on-call status is negotiated between the employee unions and the State, and it is not possible for OCS to change these rates unilaterally. However, OCS has been able to implement pay bonuses for frontline staff in the Protective Services job class who meet longevity requirements.

OCS strongly supports the creation of a career ladder for PSS staff by expanding the opportunity for workers with experience and longevity to be promoted to PSS 3's. This year OCS is in the process of re-classifying current positions to add 80 PSS 3 positions for this purpose.

OCS has also identified ways to support employees in their graduate and post graduate academic endeavors through education stipends. OCS recognizes that employee compensation and benefits are crucial to worker retention.

Training and Development

In collaboration with the University of Alaska Child Welfare Academy (CWA), OCS is continuously evaluating and improving the effectiveness of its training programs and has added many new courses for employees in the last few years. OCS encourages and supports employee attendance at conferences and trainings and offers hundreds of online trainings to all staff. Mentoring opportunities for frontline staff and their supervisors have been implemented including mentoring facilitated through the recent creation of specific PSS 3 positions. OCS has provided training covering many of topics noted in the CRP's report to include deciphering drug testing results and working with diverse populations. OCS added Diversity, Equity and Inclusion training to its curriculum this year, and continues to provide training on the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) as well as the impacts of historical trauma. OCS recognizes that working with diverse cultures is a challenge and will continue to look for ways to improve the employees' skills in this vital area.

Technology, Workflow & Support

An ongoing, extensive redesign of the OCS web-based Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System referred to as ORCA (Online Resource for the Children of Alaska) is well underway with the goal being to increase the system's efficiency with new time-saving features. OCS is also developing a centralized, electronic filing system to facilitate better organization of and access to case documents. Dictation specific software previously made available was underutilized, expensive and was therefore discontinued. However, state-issued cell phones and computers both have the option for dictation.

Additional support for OCS caseworkers via more support staff such as Social Services Associates (SSA) is an ongoing effort of OCS. This year, OCS received funding for the creation of 20 new SSA positions. Additionally, existing centralized programs such as the Special Needs Hotline and the Childcare unit continue to lift work off frontline staff so they can focus on direct child safety and case management work. Although in recent years there has been unspent funding under the personal services line due to unfilled positions, there are restrictions on how that money might be reallocated, which OCS must abide by. OCS administrators track the budget closely and, when possible, move funds from the personal services line to cover other program expenses.

Reciprocal Engagement

CRP Recommendations

- CRP should establish a plan to engage with the Tribal/State compacting system.
- CRP requests OCS share the round table report, and their response on how they will utilize the report, with all OCS staff.
- CRP requests OCS share the CRP Annual Report, and the OCS response to the annual report, with all OCS staff.

OCS Response

OCS supports all three recommendations under the Enduring Priority “Reciprocal Engagement”. The Alaska Tribal Child Welfare Compact has provided resources and authority to Tribes to take on more child protection roles throughout the state, so the CRP establishing a plan to better understand the Compact is supported. OCS also agrees with the last two recommendations. Both the Roundtable Report and the CRP annual Report have already been shared with all OCS staff and they have been encouraged to read both documents.

Public Outreach

CRP Recommendations

- CRP further refines compliance with the Open Meetings Act.
- CRP establishes a plan to continue engaging with communities, legislators, and other stakeholders.

OCS Response

OCS agrees with both recommendations under this enduring priority given the CRP’s responsibility to engage stakeholders and the public as outlined in Alaska Statute (47.14.255). Engagement with legislators and policy makers is also vital to ensure they are fully informed regarding both the ongoing work of the panel and the panel’s recommendations for improving Alaska’s child protection system.

Collaborative Relationship with OCS

CRP Recommendations

- OCS fully funds the work of the CRP
 - Panel size has increased to meet state regulations which increases the costs related to administrative activities, funding should be reflective of those changes
 - A more robust travel budget is needed to allow panel members to conduct in person site visits, and attend the national conference, annual meeting, and annual retreat.
- OCS works toward increasing awareness of the CRP among OCS workers to facilitate opportunities for collaboration between OCS and the CRP.
- CRP and OCS should work together to identify methods that would allow a pathway for direct communication between the CPR and OCS workers.
- The CRP and OCS should continue to work together collaboratively while maintaining the autonomy of the CRP.

OCS Response

OCS increased the CRP budget to maximum historical levels in FY23 (following 2 years with reduced budgets) and will evaluate the possibility for further increases in the future based upon

detailed information provided by the Panel (a formal budget amendment request supporting the needs described in this report) and the availability of funding. OCS also supports the other recommendations under this priority and will work with the Panel to identify specific actions that might further accomplish the goals of mutual collaboration, functional autonomy of the panel, and increased communication between OCS staff and the panel.

CRP Education and Development

CRP Recommendations

- CRP has a dedicated meeting with OCS leadership to find out what they would like the role of the CRP to be, how the CRP could help them improve OCS and to hear their perspective on how the CRP could be more effective.
- CRP becomes better educated and equipped to be advocates for the child welfare system. - The CRP needs more resources to increase capacity for advocacy.
- OCS identify key stakeholders that could advocate for OCS around retention.
- To ensure consistency in funding, the CRP coordination/support services contract should be a line item in the budget
 1. CRP will make a formal letter of recommendation to the Commissioner about the CRP being a line item in the budget.
 2. CRP recommends the OCS Director formally request the CRP be a line item when developing their budget.
 3. CRP should advocate legislatively as needed to ensure the CRP budget becomes a line item.

OCS Response

The CRP's attention is dedicated not only to improving the child protection system in Alaska, but also to improving the quality of the work of the Panel itself, is laudable. OCS is supportive of these recommendations in principle though the specific actions outlined under the fourth recommendation may not be the most practical or effective way to ensure adequacy and consistency of future funding. However, it is a priority for OCS that the CRP is adequately funded. OCS also appreciates that the Panel seeks input from OCS Leadership regarding possible ways to improve the CRP's effectiveness in its mission. Finally, the CRP has historically often been effective in its advocacy role, and it is good to see that the Panel is looking at ways to continue to improve its effectiveness in this area.

Conclusion

OCS would like to thank the CRP for producing a report with many thoughtful and detailed recommendations aimed at improving child protection in Alaska. This year, the Panel took a new and creative approach to conducting its work and the CRP's efforts are evident. All of this work also took place while the Panel was busy recruiting and orienting new members, and in the process creating a Panel that is larger and more diversified than in most prior years. All of

these efforts have not gone unnoticed, and OCS looks forward to even stronger collaboration and additional accomplishments that will take place in 2022-23.